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SUBJECT: TURKISH AMBASSADOR ON ARTICLE 140 AND KIRKUK

Classified By: A/DCM Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Middle East Kahl on January 11, Turkish Ambassador Murat Ozcelik said senior KRG officials recently signaled for the first time an understanding that Kirkuk would not ultimately be annexed to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), and that "some sort of compromise" on Kirkuk was necessary. Turkey supported temporary special status for Kirkuk (albeit with reservations); a period of ten years could be "fair". Ozcelik anticipated that Sunni Arabs, who strongly oppose special status, would require considerable convincing and stressed that all parties must help give KRG President Barzani political cover by referring to Article 140 as a point of reference for whatever formula was agreed. Ozcelik said Barzani had asked him to participate in a Turkoman-Kurd reconciliation effort in Kirkuk and a parallel Sunni Arab-Kurd effort in Ninewa. He believed progress on the latter was unlikely until after the upcoming national election. Details on elections, government coalition formation and Iran's nuclear ambitions are reported septel. END SUMMARY.

KRG SIGNALS "SOME SORT OF COMPROMISE" NEEDED ON KIRKUK

¶2. (C) DASD Kahl asked Ozcelik for his assessment of what concessions on Article 140 and Kirkuk the Kurds would seek in exchange for Kurdish Alliance List (KAL) support for a government coalition. Ozcelik accompanied Turkish Minister of Interior Atalay for talks between Turkey, the GOI and the KRG on December 21 in Erbil, where KRG Minister of Interior Sinjari said the KRG understood that Kirkuk would not be attached to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Sinjari said it was understood in the KRG that "some sort of compromise" on Kirkuk and implementation of Article 140 was necessary, and the Kurds were prepared to "work on that". Ozcelik said he was "certain" Sinjari, a close confidante of Barzani, would not comment directly on a subject as sensitive as Kirkuk unless he was confident he was accurately reflecting KRG President Barzani's thinking. He claimed it was the first time a senior Kurdish leader suggested to Turkish officials that there could be some flexibility in the KRG's approach to implementation of Article 140 and Kirkuk.

TURKEY (GRUDGINGLY) SUPPORTS SPECIAL STATUS FOR KIRKUK

¶3. (C) Claiming that having Kirkuk more closely tethered to the KRG would have served long-term Turkish commercial interests better, Ozcelik said Turkey nonetheless supports "some version of special status" as articulated in UNAMI's report on DIBs areas. (Comment: Conventional wisdom is that Turkey opposes having Kirkuk become part of the Iraqi Kurdistan region. End comment.) It was not a comfortable policy position for Turkey to endorse, Ozcelik said, but the

idea of "dual nexus" (Kirkuk would be formally linked to both Baghdad and the KRG) was "too complicated" for Iraq. He highlighted that the mechanism by which a semi-autonomous Kirkuk received its budget would be an important element requiring careful negotiation with the parties.

14. (C) DASD asked whether special status for Kirkuk would be temporary, and whether it would require a constitutional amendment. Saying the issue needed to be explored, Ozcelik speculated that if the parties were able to buy enough time, the Kurds would understand that increased economic activity in the context of a more stable Iraq made administrative boundaries less important. "Special status (for Kirkuk) for a period of ten years or so could be fair", Ozcelik said, and could allow sufficient time for Kurds to realize that they did not have to have direct control of Kirkuk to greatly influence it to the benefit of the KRG. He anticipated that Sunni Arabs, who strongly oppose special status, would require considerable convincing. He stressed that all parties needed to help Barzani "save face" by referring to Article 140 as a point of reference for whatever formula was agreed on.

15. (C) The Ambassador's Senior Advisor for Northern Iraq (SANI) asked how such a process would account for hardline Kurdish leaders like Kamal Kirkuki, whom Barzani had used to justify his own inflexibility on Kirkuk. Noting that any political process included multiple actors representing a range of views, the most extreme of which were often used by more moderate players to advance their agendas, Ozcelik said the upcoming elections had complicated the rhetoric. After elections and formation of a new government, it would be important to assess the new Prime Minister's views on Article 140 and Kirkuk. Ozcelik urged consultation with former PM Iyad Allawi and VP Adel Abd al-Mehdi (both potential PM candidates whom Turkey endorses) on Article 140 and disputed internal boundary (DIBs) areas.

TURKOMAN-KURD RECONCILIATION EFFORT IN KIRKUK

16. (C) Ozcelik said he and KRG President Barzani had discussed the idea of a Turkoman-Kurd reconciliation committee for Kirkuk. Ozcelik would chair the Turkoman side; Barzani's chief of staff, Fuad Hussein, would chair the KRG side. Ozcelik claimed Kirkuki Turkomans had realized the limits of their influence during the recent, bruising election law debate and speculated they were now more receptive to working constructively with Kurds. (Comment: It is not clear to us that such is the case. End comment.) He admitted that the prevailing view in Ankara was that the Kurds were always troublesome, and more difficult than the Arabs to deal with in terms of advancing Turkish interests.

PARALLEL KURD-SUNNI ARAB EFFORT IN NINEWA

17. (C) Ozcelik said Barzani also requested his help in reconciling Sunni Arabs and Kurds in Ninewa, where the (Kurdish) Ninewa Fraternal League (NFL) had boycotted the (Sunni) al-Hadba Gathering (AHG)-dominated Ninewa Provincial Council. Ozcelik said he believed ending the NFL boycott was "doable", but only after upcoming national elections. A structured mechanism of engagement would be needed to clarify the process and help achieve solutions on the ground, he said.

LINGERING KURDISH FEARS OF TURKEY'S INTENTIONS

18. (C) Addressing Turkey's role, Ozcelik said that despite recent progress in mending Turkish-KRG ties, the Kurds feared that Turkey's hardline Turkish General Staff (TGS) and nationalist elements could orchestrate a reversal of Turkey's current policy of reconciliation. It was important for Turkey to underscore to the KRG that Turkey's long-term security and, critically, commercial interests lay in keeping

Turkey-KRG relations on an even keel.

19. (C) DASD Kahl cleared on this message.
HILL